MILLY WITKOP-ROCKER

THIS ESSAY BY RUDOLF ROCKER WAS HANDSET WITH THE KENNERLEY AND HADRIANO TYPES DESIGNED BY FREDERIC W. GOUDY & PRINTED ON SUPERFINE TEXT PAPER.

FRONTISPIECE (DRAWING) BY FERMIN ROCKER.

PRIVATE EDITION PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR.

THE ORIOLE PRESS

JOSEPH ISPILL TYPOGRAPHER

June - 1956

Reprinted 1981: in Europe by Cienfuegos Press, "Over the Water", Sanday, Orkney, UK KW17 2BL; in USA by Cienfuegos Distribution, 3512 12th Ave. So., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407; and Soil of Liberty, Box 7056, Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407.

MILLY WITKOP-ROCKER

By RUDOLF ROCKER



CRAYON DRAWING BY FERMIN ROCKER

Cienfuegos Press & Soil of Liberty

Arch R 6431



MILLY WITKOP-ROCKER

BORN - MARCH 1ST, 1877

DIED - NOVEMBER 23RD, 1955

MILLY WITKOP-ROCKER

THIS ESSAY BY RUDOLF ROCKER WAS HANDSET WITH THE KENNERLEY AND HADRIANO TYPES DESIGNED BY FREDERIC W. GOUDY & PRINTED ON SUPERFINE TEXT PAPER.

FRONTISPIECE (DRAWING) BY FERMIN ROCKER.

PRIVATE EDITION PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR.

THE ORIOLE PRESS

JOSEPH ICHILL TYPOGRAPHER

June - 1956

Reprinted 1981: in Europe by Cienfuegos Press, "Over the Water", Sanday, Orkney, UK KW17 2BL; in USA by Cienfuegos Distribution, 3512 12th Ave. So., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407, and Soil of Liberty, Box 7056, Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407.

ISBN 0-904564-50-3

MILLY WITKOP-ROCKER

WE came from different worlds, worlds as unrelated and strange to each other as the little town of Slotopol in the Ukraine and the ancient city on the Rhine where I was born. As to how and why life brought us together, a whole story could be written about it without our getting closer to the truth. The how may perhaps be explained; the why is as unfathomable as life itself.

What we call the "purpose of life" is only the purpose we ourselves ascribe to it, for it is the logic of human thought alone that gives life a purpose. But Life has no logic and is full of contradictions and dark riddles. Logic on the other hand, is nothing more than a device, unable to function without the aid of metaphores and symbols. The finest logic is merely a creation of man, and therefore as imperfect as man

himself. It often leads to wishful thinking, and is as illusory as a mirage in a desert.

¶ The short span we call our life cannot be estimated in advance and is, at bottom, only what we ourselves make of it or what is made of it for us by others. In this domain there is room only for surmise, but not for certainty.

¶ We found each other, and although each came from an entirely different world, we built a world of our own together. This, alone, was the essence of our union.

¶ When I first met Milly in London, sixty years ago, she was already an active and devoted member of the *Workers' Friend Group*. Milly had a deeply religious nature when she came to England. But the new environment into which she came in London was one far removed from that of her native little town in the Ukraine. In the notorious sweatshops of the big ghetto where she had to earn her meager living, people worked even on the Sabbath when they had to, and did many things which were contrary to the principles of Jewish religion. The young girl rebelled against this, often courting trouble and losing her job. It was at that time that her first doubts arose. Given her character, nothing else was possible. Any half-measure was repugnant to her. Whatever she was she

had to be wholly and completely. Then, when chance brought her together with a comrade of the East End, in one of the little shops where she worked, and she began to learn the causes of the terrible misery which made the ghetto into a hell at that time, a great transformation gradually took place within her. A new vision began to take shape and, in time, she found her true place. And as she felt everything deeply she embraced the new ideas with the same fervor she had shown for the religion of her childhood. For she was one of those rare people who think with their heart as well as with their head. She devoured all the libertarian literature that came her way, and thus found new channels for her great yearning which burnt within her and which she retained to the last.

¶ Milly was a person with an inherent sense of responsibility, such as one seldom finds, and it is precisely for this reason that she was a truly free human being in everything she thought and did. When she arrived in London, a girl in her teens, she denied herself every extra penny's worth of food until, after three years, she was at last able to bring over her parents and her three sisters from Russia and provide a home for them. The effort required for this can only be appreciated by someone familiar with the unbelievable working conditions which existed in the

London ghetto at that time. Doing things of this sort was to Milly a matter of course.

¶ I lived with her for fifty-eight years. We knew bitter privations and experienced many hardships, but none of them could destroy our quiet happiness. There was something in our life that can hardly be described, a hidden temple which we alone could enter. When in lonely hours I now think back to that wonderful time, there come to my mind involuntarily the words of Auban's wife, in Mackay's ANARCHISTS. To a fool who asked her what she had contributed to the happiness of mankind, she replied with fine irony: "A great deal! I myself have been happy."

¶ Each of us could have said the same. The worst enemies of human happiness have been those who have sought to impose their formula of happiness on others. Happiness that is forced upon one is nothing but gilded slavery. There is no happiness without free choice. We should never strive to make mankind happy according to a universal panacea but should instead create living conditions that will permit each to find happiness in his own way.

¶ We had to endure many a malicious thrust of fate, but we also experienced many joyful hours, such as are granted to few and cannot be bought. When we were alone together in our free evenings, I would read

aloud to Milly many of the world's great books. Over the years we enjoyed hundreds of works by writers of every nationality and every period. A unique atmosphere pervaded then our home, exhilarating and purefying.

¶ We were never bored with each other, and always found that which was worth while and made life more beautiful. Had Milly been in accord with everything I said, this would not have been possible. But her native intelligence allowed her to form her own opinions on everything, and she was able to express them with skill. When, on such occasions, the discussion became heated, she would suddenly smile, put her arms around me and say: "We really are a funny couple." At that we would both burst out into happy laughter. We never had to seek the blue bird of happiness afar; it was in our midst.

¶ Milly was a woman of rare stature and nobility who rejected all that was ugly and mean. She was like a mother to her younger friends and comrades; even in her later years she was always surrounded by young people, who loved and revered her. Wherever we lived our modest home was a gathering place for people of different races and nationalities and it was Milly to whom it owed its warmth and charm.

¶ Only a few of her many activities in the libertarian

movement can be mentioned here. She took a conspicuous part in the struggles and constructive endeavors of the Jewish workers in England, and was to be found wherever useful and needed work was done. She also participated in all the great international demonstrations which took place in London at the time.

¶ During the great strike of the London dock laborers in 1912, she played a prominent part in helping to place hundreds of children from the families involved in the homes of Jewish comrades. This was a splendid demonstration of international solidarity made even more conspicuous by the fact that the Jewish workers themselves had barely come through one of the greatest strikes ever fought in the East End.

¶ In Germany Milly found a fertile field in the anarcho-syndicalist movement. She was one of the pioneers of the *Syndicalist Women's Alliance*, an organization which was represented at all our conventions and developed into an important adjunct of the *Freie Arbeiter-Union of Germany*.

¶ Milly was a courageous woman who always stood up for her conviction. This she proved during the first World War as well as on numerous other occasions. When, during the war, the English government issued a decree compelling all Russian immigrants in England

to enroll in the British army or face deportation to Russia, she immediately joined the protest movement and was promptly arrested. The defense lawyer who was placed at her disposal had, without consulting her, presented a plea in which he endeavored to absolve her of all guilt in the matter. Milly first learned of this statement when her case came up for trial. She immediately lodged a protest and declared: "I am grateful to my attorney for his good intentions but nevertheless declare that I will openly voice my convictions, come what may. I believe that the voice of one's conscience is the only true forum of justice." This forthright avowal resulted in her imprisonment for two and a half years, but even her judges had to respect her honesty and courage.

¶ When two people whom Fate brought together share a companionship as long as ours, they gradually become inseparable. This happened with us, too. Whenever the name of one was mentioned, the name of the other was echoed. Thus we became the "romantic pair," as our Spanish friend Tarrida del Marmol once called us in jest.

¶ It was inevitable that some day the hour should come when one of us would have to go. But this is sober logic which cannot lessen the pain of the bereaved. I only know that, with this wonderful woman,

something was taken from me that no eternity can bring back. We have all lost her, for, with Milly, one of the last of the old guard has passed away, one who contributed sixty years of her life to a cause that will never die as long as men live on this earth.

¶ What she was to me personally, I cannot say. There are moments in our life when words become meaningless for they can never express one's deepest feelings. Since these are hardly a subject for public exhibition it is perhaps just as well. During the long and yet so short years of our union I received the best and the purest that this noble woman had to give. For this I must be grateful.

¶ She died as she had lived—brave, composed, and without complaint. During the last ten months she was often ill, but always recovered. But gradually her strength began to wane and she felt tired nearly all the time. The doctors comings and goings became more frequent. Nevertheless, she would rally now and then, giving us new hope. During the last weeks, she often had difficulty in breathing, and I believe she herself felt the end approaching but concealed her feelings, so as not to cause us any worry. The doctor believed that her breathing difficulties were caused by hardening of the arteries. Once after a short rally she said to me: "I wish I could live another year or two,

to see our Philip grow and thrive." She loved our grandson with all the tenderness of which she was capable. Her words made a deep impression upon me. I said nothing, but I clearly felt what was going on in her soul.

¶ Two weeks before the end the real agony started. Breathing became increasingly difficult for her so that we finally decided to take her to the hospital. I felt what was coming and my heart was numb. When Fermin, Polly and I came to see her the next morning, we found her in an oxigen tent. She smiled at us as we entered and asked me to open the curtain. Then she kissed us tenderly. When she noticed the gloomy look on Fermin's face she said: "What is the matter, Fermin? You should not be sad, my dear boy." Then she threw her arms around my neck and said in a weak but distinct voice: "I will fight to the last, my dear, and if I fail, you will know it was not my fault." Then she kissed us all with great feeling, as though she wished to say farewell, and sank exhausted upon her pillow. We left the room in silence, to let her rest. When we returned two hours later, she lay in the same position, but she was already unconscious. The doctor told us that her blood pressure was sinking. An hour later she breathed her last.

¶ She died on November 23rd, 1955 and was cremated

on the 27th in accordance with her wishes. Once when we happened to touch on the subject she said, half in jest: "Perhaps it is all the same to the dead what happens to them but I find it beautiful to be consumed by flames, for fire is a pure element. To be eaten up by worms in the grave is ugly and repugnant to my feelings." She was right. We went to life together for almost sixty years and my ashes will mingle with hers when my hour comes.

¶ The news of her death spread rapidly all over the world. From almost every country came messages of condolence. Old friends, libertarian groups, trade unions and other organizations, all sent expressions of sympathy. I was touched by the kind words that were said about my companion of so many years. They helped to ease that forsaken feeling in this most difficult hour of my life. It is good to have faithful friends at such a time. However, I do not want them to worry about my future. I am not in despair and shall still be able to face life as I always did. One of my closest friends, who understood the intimate relationship between Milly and myself, wrote me: "You and Milly have lived so intensively with and for each other that she cannot be taken away from you at all."

¶ These words rang home for they contain a great deal of truth. I shall have to rearrange my life but she

will remain the inspiration to me that she always was. From the very start she had taken the strongest interest in my work, and just a few months before her death, when I had a chance to resume my interrupted work, she said smilingly: "The tapping of your typewriter keys is music to my ears." Her boundless devotion made possible the full development of my creative powers, and will be an inspiration in the future.

¶ I may say without false modesty that I always have had the strength to face calamities, but I have never thought of myself as a hero, even less as a martyr, as there was something in both that was alien to my nature. I endured suffering because I had to, not because I wanted to. I am not stronger than others nor weaker. I shall continue to work, not because I want to deaden my sorrows but because it will help me endure it, and also because I have the inner certainty that this was Milly's wish, too.

¶ Great suffering should purify a man, direct his thinking inward, make him milder and more human. It should deepen his understanding and strengthen his character. But when anguish destroys his moral fibre his powers of resistance crumble and the energy so necessary for a new start is dissipated. Suffering can become a tyrant that puts the will in shackles and robs it of its purpose. I was not made for this.

¶ Milly and I have loved life because it gave us so much happiness, so much beauty and opened such rich perspectives, more than compensating for all the misery, the hardships and the gray monotony of everyday life.

¶ Calderon may have been right when he said: "Y toda la vida es sueño"— and all life is but a dream, because all things are transitory and subject to time's eternal drift. But it is man who gives shape and substance to the dream. It can become either a luminous experience or a nightmare that crushes and pulls him down into the depths.

¶ Therefore I shall continue to work, to create, to hope and to fight, just as I did when Milly was at my side. I know I have not squandered my life; hence death has no fear for me. But my friends and comrades, who have shown me so much love and kindness in these trying days, I can only say: Do not despond. I still feel strong enough to defy fate, just as Milly would have done, too, had I been the first to go. The words of the poet speak for me, too:

"I have seen much sorrow and many tears in my life, but I have also seen great happiness and exultant bliss. I have looked into the abysses where horror dwells and pale fear, but my eyes have also seen blue shores veiled in dreamy remoteness, the home of man's

great longing and eternal hope. I am armed against every storm. He who suffers much, comprehends much and does not snap like a dry twig in the wind."

¶ Those of us to whom nature has been generous should accept her gifts with modesty and humility. If we are blessed with more than average intelligence we should never forget how little we actually know. There was much that I was able to give to Milly and she accepted it with gratitude. She, on the other hand, gave me far more in return. She opened a door in my heart which had been unknown to me before and which might never have been opened without her. Through the open door came sunshine, came joyous experience and inner peace without which life would be hopelessly distorted. That is why she will always be with me, my companion of so many fruithful and happy years. She stood undismayed through storm and stress and, at the same time was a tender mother to our child. She was a part, and surely the best part of my life. Death may separate us physically, it can never erase her image from my heart or dim the memories of the precious years we spent together.